

I want y'all to imagine that scene Jesus just described, the one with the Pharisee and the tax collector. At the most basic level, Pharisees were clergy of the day. Tax collectors had a reputation for skimming off the top and also occupied a tough spot in their communities; they were representatives of the empire and the physical embodiment of taking from the poor to give to the rich. These two come strolling into the Temple and there in front of God and everybody, the Pharisee recites his religious resume of good deeds. The tax collector hangs back and whispers a small prayer: "be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus says the humble tax collector's got it right and the Pharisee's got it wrong. No surprise there, right? Well, kinda. This story's been around for a couple thousand years, so we kinda expect it to go the way it does. But back then, the first time Jesus said something like that, it was shocking. Pharisees were faithful leaders. Tax collectors were cheating extortionists. Jesus' story flipped that all the way around. It was the sort of thing that would make people gasp. I can imagine the crowd gathering in the parking lot afterwards whispering about the crazy stuff Jesus said. So, which one are you? Which would you rather be? The answer's pretty obvious, right? We're in church, so it's gotta be the humble one. Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee.

Hmm. Let's try this again. What the Pharisee expresses gratitude for not being is good stuff not to be. Problem is he's all puffed up about how great he is. The tax collector just sees his own faults. And that's good, simple, and humble -- things we should all strive to be. For what it's worth, this isn't an unusual thing for Jesus to talk about. Over in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, he says, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but don't notice the log in your own eye?" Why're you always looking at others' faults and ignoring your own? None of *us* ever act like *that*, of course not, but would you believe it, I've heard tell of some folks that do! Now, in both moments, Jesus warns us against getting all puffed up and haughty, warns us against elevating ourselves, warns against pomposity and arrogance and bloviating self-importance (and yes, I do own a thesaurus). At the same time, he also promotes extreme self-abnegating humility. Humility is good and virtuous; arrogance is to be avoided. Sure.

But I think we have a problem in modern Christianity with all this. Thanks to the humble tax collector and the speck in my own eye, we've gotten hesitant to name where things've gone wrong. Take a look at those old prophets. Not Joel, he's a little too optimistic. I'm talking prophets like Jeremiah, who we've spent so much time with this Fall. His whole job was to tell people what they were doing wrong! He wasn't a tax collector, he wasn't a Pharisee, he was a prophet. Jesus, too. He was a prophet of sorts, and much of his job involved calling out specks, logs, and braggarts, too. We need those kinds of prophets now 'cause things are broken. And I don't just mean, ya know, **things**. I mean that some Christians are afraid to speak up specifically because of these kinds of stories from Jesus. We're afraid of coming off as judgmental or self-righteous. We don't want to be that Pharisee, and we know there's bound to be some logs in our eyes. But all too often, that concern keeps us quiet when our voices are needed the most. And right now, y'all, our voices are needed the most. This humility talk also makes it difficult to speak up not just when someone's doing wrong but when someone's doing wrong to you. Too much humility keeps victims and their advocates silent. And now, with so many targets on so many people, now is no time to be silent.

Scripture says explicitly what we'll be judged on. Jesus says explicitly what we'll be judged on. We're to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the foreigner, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. Did you catch how much of that had to do what those in need've earned? None. "Earned's" not part of this. Zoom out, and you see a God that wants us to care for those who go without and are crushed by systems of oppression. To put a finer point on it, in that little passage alone, Jesus has quite a lot to say about

hot button issues like SNAP benefits, Medicare, ICE, concentration camps, and humanitarian aid in foreign lands. Again, Jesus doesn't say anything about what recipients of that aid have earned. The only prerequisite for Jesus is need. Thank God I'm not like...well, hmm.

Let's back up. That Pharisee-Tax Collector parable...I wonder if I've been coming at it all wrong. I wonder if it's not really about two different people. I wonder if it's two aspects of the same person. All of us, at times, are truly faithful and, at times, are truly penitent. Some days puffed up by supposed righteousness, some days beaten down by self-loathing. Maybe it's not a choice of one or the other so much as a kind of cycle. I recognize my failings, let them weigh too heavy on my shoulders, seek to make things right and sometimes actually manage to. Then I get to where the habits of religious life become a source of pride I tell folks about, and instead of sharing what an amazing place St. Thomas' is, I might start thinking I'm extra amazing too, and everyone should be so lucky to come to my church. And then I'm too puffed up and have something to confess again and back into the tax collector's shoes I go. Maybe the parable's less about being one of the two and more about learning how to live with the difficulties of being both.

If that's true, then maybe it makes some space for the overly-humble to speak out and for the overly confident to step back in a kind of ongoing dance of humility and confidence both waxing and waning. Instead of being too self-interested to see reality or too humble to speak up, maybe we get a bit more comfortable knowing how it feels from both sides of the parable. And maybe that kind of understanding draws softer voices to the front and louder ones to the back. That kind of confidence is just as comfortable in silence as in speech. The world needs us to speak up, but if I'm being honest here, the world also needs some Christians to quiet down for a bit. Thank God I'm not like...

Governments shouldn't make their decisions based on what religious texts say. Religious people should, but we can't expect anyone else to live by our rules. We need to get better at recognizing when to be quiet and when to be loud, when to proclaim and when to listen, when to humble and when to exalt. And we need to get better at recognizing we've got all that working in us at the same time. Look for who's standing far off and go to them. Don't preach at 'em, berate 'em, or beat 'em down. Hold their hands, ask what they need, and help 'em get there. Look who's standing tall and go to them, too. Remind 'em of those in desperate need of compassion, and teach 'em how to help. We contain both, y'all, as does everyone around us. We're human -- fallible, doubting, worried, hopeful, scared, loving humans. Complicated and faithful and uncertain and way too certain all at once. Too loud, too quiet. We beat ourselves up and we pat ourselves on the back 'cause we're all human. As you leave this place and re-enter, ya know *everything,* remember that. We're all human. Hungry, well-fed, poor, rich, native-born, foreign, indigenous, straight, queer, humble, or proud, we're all -- ALL -- human.